

Authorship woes: Guidance for Postgraduate residents and Research fellows



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Undertaking a short-term research constitutes a key part of trainee physician's training and may be mandatory for some specialties. Contracted research workers / Clinical research fellows contribute to major bulk of research conducted in higher education institutes & university hospitals. An opportunity to report the results and publish an article of a project is an important milestone in a trainee's career progression. It may be a stepping stone for that elusive higher degree / entry into higher surgical training. Fifty one cases of research misconduct were reported to COPE in 2001.

However the authorship of research comes with its own woes that a young investigator may not have an insight of. Discrepancy between who actually does the research and who gets the credit is not uncommon. In a survey of 809 authors, Flanagan A et al observed 7-16% incidence of 'ghost authorship' in full-text articles published in 6 peer-reviewed journals. A ghost author is usually an individual who made a significant contribution to a study but fails to be listed as an author. The international committee of medical journal editors (ICMJE) observes this to be professional misconduct and condemns such a practice. It may also mean a professional writer who is assigned / hired to write up an article and subsequently becomes an author on a research project. Such individuals do not meet the ICMJE criteria for authorship.

A 'gift author' (also known as honorary author) is usually a senior figure (Dean / Departmental chair / Professor) who gets listed as a author without significant contributor by virtue of his / her position. The common reason for such a practice may be either to obtain favour in terms of career advancement or enhance the chances of a publication. Another commonly observed practice is to add a colleague as an author with an understanding they would reciprocate the same to increase one's list of publications.

Enumerated below are some of ethical / professional set of guidelines to help such individuals:-

I) Prior to taking up the job – Preparing to practising ethical authorship

- Prior to job interview at the pre-interview visit, discuss with current research fellows to get the vibe of the department. Spend a few minutes on internet reviewing the recent publication of the department its authors comparing with scientific programme proceedings where they were presented prior to publication as a full-text article.
- Ask if the department has a policy on authorship and obtain a copy of that document for personal use.
- Read at least one book on 'publication ethics' familiarising oneself as to what is likely to come / what to expect. Donate a copy to the departmental library at the time of leaving from the job (if it doesn't have one) to benefit newer colleagues.

II) Once in the job – Taking up research projects

- Start discussing about authorship when you undertake a research project. Know the individuals involved and their roles from the beginning to avoid misunderstandings.
- Have a face-to-face meeting with all concerned and sort out differences / address issues – record the minutes of the meeting.
- Discuss about authorship as the project evolves and you begin to draft a conference abstract. Show it to all the authors involved – so that all are in agreement with results / conclusions / recommendations prior to its submission.
- Do not accept a new project or procrastinate – until the full-text first draft of the current research project is written-up keeping the journal in mind you wish to submit to (preferably done before your job contract ends).
- In-addition to the ICMJE universal authorship criteria, educate oneself with individual journals' authorship criteria ensuring they are all met.
- Always run the final manuscript with all authors before submitting it to a journal staking claim for first authorship (if you rightfully deserve). There should be a consensus on all issues relating to the manuscript at this stage to avoid future embarrassments.
- Repeat the whole process when you take-up another new research project.
- There is no substitution to diligent maintenance of records and communication.

It may not always be possible to observe above procedures at all times given the power dynamics and senior colleagues / Consultants feeling uncomfortable when pinned down. Equally difficult is to have a written authorship agreement prior to undertaking research as the golden rule is 'The one with the gold makes the rules'. Some may even argue this to be not a sensible approach in real life.

The disagreement about authorship can be classified to be of two types:-

I) Disputes - What constitutes 'significant contribution' may be perceived as a matter of subjective interpretation. The best approach is to negotiate with people involved and attempt to reach an acceptable solution to all parties involved. If you are omitted from authorship on a research project that you rightfully deserved, then:-

i) Ask for an opportunity to be heard and vent your unhappiness to the senior author. Seek an explanation listing the facts and avoid being emotional. Many a times a deal is struck here.

ii) If you still disagree with the supervisor's decision, the COPE (Commission on professional ethics) recommends appealing against this decision to someone more senior. It could be your Departmental chair / Professor or Clinical director.

II) Professional misconduct - If you are asked / being forced to do something that you perceive as being unethical with authorship list, handling this could be challenging as:-

- Maintaining silence – could mean one being complicit to unethical practice and against GMC's good medical practice on probity.

- Assuming the role of 'Whistleblower' – may have dire implications on your career / short-term goals.

- The COPE recommendation again is to be as objective as possible sticking to facts citing the journal editor's authorship recommendations and how executing the requested / ordered act contravenes / violates it.

Occasionally it may also happen wherein you may be named in a publication against your wishes or being unaware of it. Again the key is liaising with co-authors at an early stage expressing one's wish to be removed from a particular research. If you discover this after publication, a formal letter should be written to journal editor (with permission of all authors) to amend the publication.

It is also important to cultivate the habit of acknowledging all contributors who have helped one with a research project and may not satisfy the authorship criteria. It could be that statistician who performed the complex calculation and help you derive meaningful conclusion from numbers or secretary who performed word processing / type-setting the manuscript. Be lavish in your praise – whatever goes out comes back in some form. Familiarise with contributorship guidelines of individual journals.

The following are merely guidelines only. A foundation of trust and honesty is of paramount importance to any publication exercise as observed by Lederberg – “The act of publication is an inscription under oath, a testimony...”

Undertake research with probity & integrity adhering to GMC's good medical practice.

Good luck in your research career.....

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Recommended reading

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